

## **Closed Eyes**

By. Rebecca Avakian

Amelia's friend Sasha had counted out the depression pills before leaving on this trip. A fun getaway into the mountains, to breathe something different than the too sterile apartment, and for Sasha's writing inspiration. The other woman had kept her new story ideas close to her heart but admitted needing different scenery and girl's time. Amelia did not want to fuck up this week, looking forward to a break from her father's death and asshole brother, but from the moment the car set off to take them to Banner Elk she felt doom.

The castle's mirror Amelia contemplates into is overly ornate with silver embellishments, but the grandeur is dulled by rust. She remains preoccupied with the reflection in the glass, which was similarly wrought with imperfections like scratches and odd black specks. When she stepped into the bathroom her gaze was locked, examining her extremities for something. That something being rusty freckles, silver hairs, or acne scars. There was a wrongness in the clone looking back at her. Still, even after painstakingly searching, she could find no physical evidence.

It was overly frustrating for Amelia because she could feel unsettling bubbling underneath her skin, as if she is an imposter in her own body. Yet, nothing was there. What of the red streams she saw drip onto her hand earlier? What of the itchiness of wearing her skin? She felt close to realizing why the person suit was wrong. She could envision it with her eyes closed. There she stood in the same position in her mind, but the reflection showed the suit erupting, melting, and tearing. The face becomes misshapen by ballooning skin painfully extending underneath, the enlarged masses disfiguring her identity and close to popping. And

with her eyes closed in a wince, she can feel ripping along the skin on her arms. She breaks the daydream spell with a gasp and collapses against the sink.

The pill case clattering to the floor echoed a church bell toll throughout the bathroom, and Amelia felt sick to her stomach. How could she ruin the week? How could she act normal? How could she even tell Sasha? How could she manage without the Abilify? The meds were absent from the case, but she remembers popping them in there. Surviving without them is a dangerous gamble; if last time was a sign, it would be to fold. She spent a couple of days locked up in her apartment, which was ok because she worked remotely, but she remained frozen and confused. Thankfully Sasha had turned up four days in, because the voice of Erwin, Amelia's father, had turned constant instead of the regular occasional occurrence. Amelia was turning desperate for it to stop and had laid out the hoarded pills for a final cocktail, but her friend stopped all of that.

Sasha always meant well and delivered. As such, she swept Amelia off to a castle. "It's just a normal house that the owners rent out," her friend had said over the phone, "Whole community is called Tynecastle. They're just stylized as castles. It'll be a creative escape for both of us."

Pulling up the drive to the estate had been intimidating to Amelia. They had arrived late, and the shrouded house appeared as a tiny Scottish castle, out of place for the North Carolina mountains. She had nearly mistaken it for a church because of the metalwork crosses perched atop the roof. Almost expecting a priest to be waiting inside for a confession.

Thankfully, the furniture mixes with the modern, especially in the bedroom. Amelia retreats from the abandoned pill case left on the bathroom floor. She doesn't know how to tell Sasha about forgetting the Abilify; she has been sitting on the issue for three days. Day trips took

up most of the time, and trying to act normal hadn't been hard. Amelia played the part well because she hadn't been off the meds too long, and she was distracted. Nights spent in the castle have been obstacles to her sleep because she heard the corridor whispering and waiting. It was a beautiful estate, but she felt wrong being there.

"Amelia?" A soft voice says. The woman in question jumps, clambers atop the quilted bed, and peers around the room. "Hello?"

"Yes?" Amelia calls out, arms caging around each other while continuing her search for the voice.

The door opens, and Sasha peers her head around, "Were you not going to let me in? What're you doing?"

"Sorry, there was... a cockroach. It slipped underneath the bathroom door. Ya know how I don't like bugs."

Sasha lets out a sound of disgust and throws herself, face first, on the bed next to Amelia. Her voice muffled, "Pretty house, cool castle, comes with creepy bugs." She turns over on her back.

"Pretty house, yeah, but it's definitely not a cool castle, been like an oven. Don't want to talk about creepy bugs, but why're you in here? Pretty late."

"Wanted to tell you good morning and ask if you want to come to the store with me. It's only nine, you sleep ok? Take your meds yet?"

Amelia coughs a bit, "Yes, no. No to the sleep bit, and yessir to the meds bit. Jumbled up from not getting enough sleep. Like I said, it's like an oven in here. I'm burned alive if I try to get under this quilt."

"Gotcha," Sasha lifts a thumbs up, "Proud of you for coming so far."

And Amelia feels like shit because a pill container lays as damning evidence behind the bathroom door. Does Sasha know? Is she going to run away?

"Alright, miss blank face-"

"Don't like that." Amelia slips under the quilt, not in the mood for the nickname.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. For now, though," Sasha smiles, "want to take an adventure to the store?"

At that, a thunderclap intrudes through the castle walls, and the lights go out. Sasha yelps and pulls out her phone to use as a light, but Amelia stays still, peering into the far corner of the room. Something had moved as the room went into darkness. Sasha's light fills their space on the bed. Amelia saw that whatever it was had been pretty tall. If Sasha asked, she would respond that there was nothing there, but the castle is hiding something. That mystery must be spying outside their little ball of light.

"I was going to tell you about the storm. It wasn't supposed to start until this afternoon. We're not going to be able to go on that hike," Sasha says.

"What should we do instead?"

"Well, as I've been trying to ask, do you want to go to the store with me? It'll be more difficult because of the downpour, but it'll give us the food we don't have."

"No. I think I'll stay here," Amelia points at herself, "I haven't got ready, and you are. It'd be safer if you left now."

"Alright, don't say I didn't try to invite you." Sasha laughs a bit.

"And don't say I didn't think of what's best." Amelia lets out a laugh too.

The rain starts to launch against the windows as Amelia leans back against a mountain of pillows. She watches as Sasha disappears into the darkened corridor. The woman had left the

door wide open with her exclaimed departure. Ignoring the cold draft coming into the room, Amelia huddles into the quilt and closes her eyes for a moment.

"Amelia?" A voice comes from the door.

"Yeah?"

She waits for an answer but does not get one, and so she looks towards the door. There is no one there, and Amelia feels a dread coil in her stomach. Did she not respond in time to Sasha? Is Sasha toying with her? Was it Sasha?

"It's not." A voice says from the same corner from earlier.

Amelia cuts her eyes over to that space, sending shock throughout her limbs. She could not see it, but felt and imagined the looming presence moving towards the foot of the bed. The way to the door was blocked.

"Would you confess?" The rain grows and pounds against the roof tiles as the voice speaks.

"No, you're not anything to confess to. Sasha would say you're not real."

"Pathetic. If I'm not real, how'd you hurt your hand."

"It was not pathetic, but what happened to my hand was real. It must have been, but I don't remember, and you are not real. I would know."

"But you don't. You can't keep your words straight," a spine-chilling laugh, "I hurt your hand, dear."

"Don't, stop it, don't call me dear."

"No, I think I will. Dear."

"You're not him," Amelia yells, "he's dead."

Lightning flashes outside, illuminating the room to show that there is no one at the foot of the bed. Amelia shoots out from the covers and towards the door, finding the hallways to be abandoned. She knows that he has fled the room, so she is safe and should rush to find the phone. Outside the windows, the world is awash in a dark grey but evidently still morning by the faint pale light beams. Sasha should be back by now, right? Amelia is unsure about how long it has been since her friend left.

Dear, he had said that, the voice. Amelia feels sick to her stomach and shakes her head. It wasn't real, she reasons once the phone was safe in her hand. Erwin has been dead for almost a month now. He hasn't been able to hurt her or Tom for over a decade. Her father's voice she just heard was not real, and she reasons to fight against the urge to call Sasha. She can do it and manage without freaking out.

Amelia breathes in and out like her therapist advised, but that does not stop the memories from creeping in. The times of being helpless, both she and her brother were just kids hurt by a man. It was wrong what he did, and she is nothing like him.

Sometimes she imagines helping both of those children. Amelia would whisk them away to safety, maybe away to a castle-like in a fairy tale. A castle-like this one, but it would be normal. It wouldn't work out because of her wrongness and because of the thing lurking outside the room. She can't escape him, even if she takes the proper medication to make it manageable. Erwin hurt her, leaving scars like the one on her hand and in her mind. Her issue is genetic, it's what her psychiatrist said, but Amelia occasionally wonders whether he purposely cursed her.

A scream jolts Amelia out of her stupor in the middle of the room. The sound traveled up from downstairs and continued again with the pitch too off to be her father's. But what happened wasn't real? Amelia makes to grab the pocket knife in her bag before taking off into the dark

corridor. If it was real, she is letting Sasha get hurt, and she can't do it anymore; she feels crazier trying to reason what's there and what's not.

The descent down the stone stairs is slower than Amelia would have liked. There has not been another scream, and she wonders if she's too late.

When Amelia turns the corner off the last step, it is to an empty open corridor devoid of any life. The enormous dark wooden door shines grey light through glass slots, similar to windows hanging along the walls. The only sounds are her own panting breath and the storm raging outside. She lowers herself to the floor and starts to cry.

"I can't do this anymore," she says. "You have to be here. I know you are here."

Minutes pass by, and Amelia still feels the emptiness, only standing up once it becomes unbearable. A warmth floods throughout her as she glances around the corridor, and it's like she's on fire. Her fist crashes against the wall, hand still gripping the pocket knife.

"I know you're here," she yells, "Come out and face me like a fucking man."

Amelia starts to pace up and down the hall, waving the weapon in preparation during her stalk.

"I'm not like you," she cries, "I'll know who I am once you're out of my head."

Her feet stop in front of a window, and she gazes out while panting. The moment does not last long because she whips around, knife ready, once a footstep sounds behind her. A clattering sounds as the weapon drops to the floor, and Sasha looks at her with wet eyes.

Bags of groceries lie abandoned by the door. "Do you know who I am?" Sasha asks.

"Do I know who I am? No, fuck, I know who you are. You're Sasha. Do you know who I am?" Amelia responds, feeling the urge to throw up, clawing up her chest.

"Yes, you're Amelia."

And Amelia throws herself towards Sasha, the latter's arms coming up to give a hug. They fall to the floor, and it's as if the rain is coming down inside the castle.

"I'm sorry," Amelia says, "I didn't tell you. How can I know who Amelia is, who I am, if I can't be honest with you? I'm not even sure this is real."

"It's safe now, you're here, and I'm here. Come on, just relax, breathe in and out."

They stay there on the floor, and Amelia focuses on listening to the beating of Sasha's breath against her hair. Amelia closes her eyes and falls asleep peacefully.